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ABSTRACT

Historically, the ethnic minorities in American life have utilized 3 major routes of upward social mobility. These are unskilled labor, ethnic crime and ethnic politics. These modes of mobility are viewed as adjustment mechanisms to the forced and sometimes violent exclusions of the respective ethnic minority from the conventional American mainstream. The dominant elites viewed these ethnic newcomers with scorn and suspicion and the overall stance of the elites was one of "militant defensiveness" wherein every attempt was made to guard their cherished Anglo-American social and political institutions. Consequently the routes of labor, crime and politics created situations whereby each group "made it" into the dominant society on its terms rather than on the terms of the dominant elites. This analysis seeks to explore these observations in relation to contemporary ethnic minorities, particularly blacks and Puerto Ricans. The impact of racial factors is minimized and considered secondary to the dominant impact of class factors. The plight of contemporary ethnic minorities is thus seen in ethnic and class terms, rather than in racial terms. (Author)

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ETHNIC MINORITIES AND DOMINANT ELITES IN AMERICAN LIFE

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Perhaps the greatest of contemporary domestic crises facing the American nation is the persistence of poverty and marginal economic status among lower-income blacks. This critical situation is particularly visible in each of our central cities, the so-called "ghettoes". The events of Watts, Detroit, Newark, etc.--each of these has become the catalyst which has prodded the American public into a reluctant awareness of the problem. More specifically, these same events have aroused the latent academic curiosities of social scientists to such a degree that there is a veritable outpouring of articles, books, theories and prognostications relevant to the problem--some of which are worthwhile, most of which are useless. However, few of these approaches attempt to inter-relate comparative historical, psychological and/or sociological evidence in their assessment of the problem. Each tends to view the situation from the vantage point of a specific discipline--one which is more or less encapsulated from the findings of the other disciplines.

How do we then maintain some degree of historical, psychological and sociological objectivity in assessing these phenomena? To do so is by no means simple, yet we have no other choice but to attempt such an assessment.

For my purposes, I feel we must survey the plight of the lower-income black population in relation to other historical lower-income American groups. In another place, I have attempted to inter-relate American lower-income ethnic groups both past and present paying particular attention to the similarities rather than to the dissimilarities between them. Much of this analysis rests on hypothetical statements made there.[1] Suffice it to say that in recent years this approach has been judiciously avoided. At present it has become academically and professionally fashionable to interpret the status of the lower-income black urbanite as though this were an entirely novel

situation in American life. References have been made to the "problem of the Negro," as one which is intrinsically unique and fundamentally different from the predicament of all previously lower-income minority groups. This mode of analysis implies that the difficulties which this black urbanite faces as a result of his inferior position on the lowest rungs of the social ladder are infinitely more complex, more paradoxical and less amenable to solution than anything ever encountered by the Irish, the Pole, the Jew, or the Italian. The problem's specific interpretation in these terms has consequently resulted in social scientists abandoning, or at least side-stepping, the socio-historical and socio-psychological relationships relevant to the routes of upward mobility for minority groups in American life.

The resultant myopic interpretation has subsequently led the majority of social observers to view the problem of the lower-income black as essentially a racial problem. Hence the black man has been differentiated from previous lower-class minority groups solely on the basis of so-called racial differences and distinctions. The typical argument runs as follows: the Negro cannot be likened to the immigrant groups of the nineteenth century simply because of his ascribed racial qualities. The former slave status and legal disenfranchisement from American social life have necessitated the realization that the Negro is in a category distinct from all previous societal rejects. His situation and problems are unique; they are literally larger and more incomprehensible than anything of a similar vein witnessed in our history, and the old answers will be irrelevant to the amelioration of the Negro's situation.[2]

Such a position betrays not only a pessimistic, but also a tempo-centric view of the lower-income black and his supposed uniqueness at the bottom of urban society. Yet, how different is this urban Negro from his

Italian counterpart of sixty years ago? How distinct is the so-called female centered household of the lower-income Black from the of the Irish a century ago? How different is the inequality and discrimination which the black ghettoite presently faces from that of his Jewish predecessors? Basically the differences are certainly there, yet I regard them as secondary. To become absorbed in analyzing only the differences between these groups implies a certain degree of ignorance of the structural supports of ethnic and class mobility which have been similar for all the minority groups in American urban life.

In addition, the assessment of the problem as essentially a problem of racial differences undermines any realistic solution. Since the racial interpretation tends to place the source of the difficulty in the psychological realm--that is, in the individual psyches of both oppressor and oppressed--, then the solution should logically lie in "reforming" the psyches! Consequently, each of us should look inward, discover our prejudices and eradicate them. Such an approach though belies our entrapment in our Protestant ethnic heritage since the solution is seen as an individual moral one rather than one which looks beyond the mere psychological to one which incorporates the psychological with the historical and the sociological. Besides, not too many people will readily admit they have been "racists" or that they harbor racist sentiments and feelings! Hence I regard this potential solution as fruitless and unrealistic.

Presently it might indeed be more fruitful to view the plight of the lower-income urban black primarily in terms of class and ethnic factors rather than racial factors. The social unrest and turmoil evident in the urban ghettoes are essentially consequences of lower-class membership and, to that degree, are not specifically causally relaxed to racial factors. John and Lois Scott in a recent article have paraphrased this relationship

stating, "Most racial antipathy in America is not pure racism but derives from the disdain of higher classes for those below them."[3]

In historical and sociological terms, the lower-income black represents the most recent ethnic group in urban America and, like his forerunners from other ethnic immigrant minorities, has migrated from agricultural poverty to industrial poverty. Essentially he has moved from the lowest position in an agricultural caste society to the lowest position in an urban class system; in the former environment caste characteristics exerted primary importance while in the latter they are secondary and of limited consequence in either defining or labeling the plight of the black man. In respect to the black man's agricultural background then, he differs little from the Irish, the Pole, or the Southern Italian. To observe that each came from a different historical, social, and cultural heritage does not alter the fact that their primary reasons for migration were similar.

So also with the lower-income Negro. It is of little concern to the unemployed or marginally employed Harlemite that his great-grandfather was a slave. His concerns are with survival in a modern urban metropolis. To dwell solely on the past glories and past humiliations of the Black man, of his African heritage, of his slave status and freedom from bondage, is largely irrelevant. Those who might disagree often respond that the system of slavery to which the black man was subjected circumvents any valid comparison with other minorities. Yet the reader should also recall that certain other ethnic groups were subjected to similar systems of human degradation. The conditions of the Irish, the Italians, the Russian and certain Slavic groups at the time of their immigration (and in certain instances, for hundreds of years before the actual immigrations) could only be described as serfdom. The ever-recurrent appearance of programs in both Eastern

Europe and in Russia similarly attest to the state of degradation and misery to which the Jews were subjected. Hence, one would suspect that the minimizing of the past horrors of the immigrant's history and the corresponding maximizing of the horrors of black slavery merely confuses the historical analysis.

All the immigrant minorities thusly had similar exposures to cultural pride and historical trauma, yet this heritage had little to do with their realistic position in American poverty. Each of these minorities also fought and pushed its way into a dominant American society which had made it quite evident that the group concerned was not socially acceptable. The Irish, the Jews, and the Italians--all faced the reality of exclusion from the dominant middle-class society yet each in turn maneuvered its way into the economic, political, and social mainstream. There is no reason to suggest that the black man will not do similarly, for if the lessons of history are correct, he will ultimately be successful.

Yet how is the black slum dweller to move from his socially inferior lower class position? What routes of upward social mobility lie open to him? The historical and social realities of America's past suggest answers to these questions, for strangely enough, the lessons of our own history provide us with the clues necessary for the understanding of the present situation.

The Myth of Benevolence

One factor remains constant: no minority group ever achieved acceptance through dependence upon the benevolence and goodwill of the dominant American society. Each of the immigrant groups started at the bottom of American society and eventually forged its way into economic, political, and--ultimately--social equality with the dominant society. They

had not been invited, and it has been adequately documented that their presence was ridiculed and resented in America. Naturally there were those few voices in the established society representing particularly the interest of social welfare and social reform who bemoaned the cruel and harsh treatment of the immigrant minorities. Yet these dissenters from middle-class propriety were too few and two powerless to effect any real change. Hence, the Irish and the Jews, the Italians and the Slavs--all faced the same basic dilemma of removing themselves from the poverty of the lower class and simultaneously gaining a foothold in the door of the socially accepted classes.

However, the socially approved routes of upward mobility bear little semblance to the daily reality of life in the slums. Being economically and socially ostracized, the newcomers were forced into seeing routes of upward mobility which were not totally explainable in terms of the Horatio Alger form of success.

In attempting to explain this and trace its background, we might suggest that the native Americans were essentially victimized by their own Puritan and Protestant Ethic traditions. The influx of millions of immigrants who were not of this tradition created a dilemma for these older elites. The behavior of these latter groups was reactive, discriminately and oftentimes violent. In the minds of most of the dominant classes the newcomers were viewed with fear and scorn and no quarter was rendered to them. Anti-catholicism, Know-Nothingism, anti-semitism, the Klu Klux Klan, etc.--each in turn became a social movement directed against particular groups who were essentially from alien cultures and which represented "foreign" ideologies.

Historically then, the psychological makeup of the dominant groups reflected this fear of these new "threats". In the 1840's the arrival of

the Irish with their vulgar manners, their poverty, their Catholicism and their distrust of all Anglo institutions--this sets in motion a series of social processes which continued for almost 100 years. Each succeeding wave of immigration continued the process. In short then, with the risk of generalizing and oversimplifying American social history, we might say that the overall stance of the dominant native American groups was that of "militant defensiveness": Guard the cherished Anglo-American institutions and traditions lest they be destroyed by these unwanted newcomers!

Yet, if we can hypothesize that their socio-psychological framework was defensive, conservative and at times even paranoid, might we not also imply that the newcomers were similarly transformed by the course of historical events?

Indeed they were. Each wave of immigration was totally unprepared for the hostile rejection it encountered in America. At first the behavior of the leadership of each group was directed at placating and appeasing the native Americans. Yet such was not possible. In time though, the voices of these proverbial "Uncle Toms" were soon smothered by other voices--ones which accepted the harsh realities of the respective era, ones which were rapidly forced to cast aside the ideas of assimilation.

Herein lies the transformation of the newcomers. Having been forcibly and violently excluded from partaking in the economic, social and political mainstream, each immigrant group turned inward. The rebuffs of the dominant society created the ethnic consciousness of the immigrant minorities. If the game were to be played, it could <u>not</u> be played by the rules of the native Americans, for the ethnics could never win under such conditions.

And so, the ethnic minorities rejected the codes by which one makes it in American life. The Horatio Alger approach could only insure the failure of these newcomers. The resultant psychological and sociological

stance of the newcomers can only be understood in these historical terms.

What then? Having rejected the native American values, goals and traditions, having been forcibly excluded from access to economic and social success, what options were available to the immigrants? In answering this we might say that the ethnic minorities made an end run; since they could not succeed in a social system which precluded their success, they literally created their own modes of differential advancement.

These modes of advancement, or more specifically these routes of upward mobility, created situations wherein the ethnic groups would make it into the dominant society on <u>their</u> terms rather than on the terms of the dominant elites. Yet what were these routes of mobility, and how were they utilized by the minorities?

<u>Routes of Upward Mobility</u>

For our purposes today, I might point out that each of the minority groups utilized three core modes of movement from the lower classes to the dominant society, each of which is inter-related and interdependent. These can be identified as <u>labor</u>, <u>crime</u>, and <u>politics</u>.[4] Each of these offered a route of upward mobility to the newcomers and their children. This is not to imply that no other modes were present. Hence, for specific ethnic groups such as the Irish, the clergy came an "occupational" source of prestige and power. For other groups, particularly the Negro and Puerto Rican, professional sports and entertainment became alternative methods of success.[5] Yet these alternative forms served as corollary forms of mobility while the primary forms remained labor, crime and politics. In discussing the progress of the immigrants and their relationship to the Anglo-Saxon Establishment, Baltzell writes, "as the traditional ways to wealth and respectability in business or the professions were more or less monopolized by Protestant

Americans of older stock, many of the more talented and ambitious members of minority groups found careers in urban politics, in organized crime, or for those of the Catholic faith, in the hierarchy of the church.[6] Thus the analysis of ethnic upward mobility somehow encompasses the relationships between these three factors or labor, crime, and politics. Let us review each briefly:

Labor

The economic expansion of the nineteenth century provided the most obvious channel of upward mobility for the recent immigrants, for it was this industrial expansion which required the abundant supply of cheap and unskilled labor which the new immigrants supplied. Yet it was these menial jobs which provided the newcomer with a relative degree of economic security, a ray of hope perhaps not for himself but possibly for his children. Certainly he was mistreated and underpaid, yet his meager, but growing, savings and primitive accumulation enabled him to initiate the ever-so-slow process of mobility from the conditions of pauperization.

This plentitude of unskilled labor thus enabled the immigrant to place himself, however unequally, on the lowest rung of the social class ladder, but at least he was on the ladder.[7] Yet this marginal employment did not function in a social vacuum, for simultaneously there existed and prospered two other modes of ethnic mobility--ethnic crime and ethnic politics.

Ethnic Crime and Ethnic Politics

It would be fruitless and unrealistic to speak of the ethnic political movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without realizing the close connection between these movements and the criminal organizations of that era. Ethnic crime and ethnic political structures formed a symbiotic relationship which is perhaps best epitomized by the success of Tammany Hall

in New York City as pointed out by Asbury in his book, The Gangs of New York.[8]

Ethnic crime and ethnic politics formed a working alliance which dates from the earlier part of the nineteenth century and has continued to the present. In New York, the Irish ranked as the most noteworthy of the early immigrant groups in both politics and crime, and their political and criminal expertise had subsequently been duplicated and imaginatively expanded by the Jews and the Italians. As each of these groups attained success and renown in politics and crime, so also did the entire ethnic group maneuver into the dominant society. Once established, in the new acceptable class, the ethnic group no longer depended on the functional relation of crime and political structure and, correspondingly, the lower ranks of the political structure and underworld activities came into the hands of those groups still struggling to remove themselves from the lower class. As Daniel Bell has phrased it, crime is the "American way of life."[9] Cloward and Ohlin point this out indicating that the new immigrant groups wasted little time in realizing the potential value of success, not only in the political sphere, but simultaneously in the criminal sphere, for political affiliations and connections provided the legal immunity so essential to the survival of criminals. In turn the influence of the gangster could be noted in his provision of financial backing for political ventures. Realistically then, it remains historically and socially significant that some of the earliest leaders of urban political machines were, at the same time, the leaders of the more important gangs of that era.[10]

Accordingly, a working relationship emerged in each of the ethnic groups between crime and politics. Illegality provided an attractive means of upward mobility and social advancement, and its success was insured through an established, though sometimes tenuous and uneasy relation to the local neighborhood political structure.[11,12]

The gangster and the urban boss thus assume great importance in American life. Among the dominant groups they are scorned and despised: among the ethnic minorities they are admired and honored. Our traditional writing of American social history ridicules the Mayor Crokers, the Boss Ryans, the Al Capones, the Arnold Rothsteins, the Frank Costellos. Yet, each was admired by his respective ethnic group as a model of success, a man to be emulated and followed. The dominant groups never quite understood these men since their values and behavior were antithetical to the "American" way..

Yet even the urban boss and the gangster yearned for success and for the respect of the dominant elites. Al Capone presents us with a fairly classic picture, and his life style illustrates this craving for social acceptance.[13]

However, the success of the boss and the gangster only extended as far as his ethnic community. The dominant groups despised these men all the more simply because they were successful by a different set of rules. It was only later that the children and grandchildren of these ethnic heroes "made it" into the higher reaches of social acceptability.

Implications

What about the black man? What relationship, if any, exists between these lessons of historical mobility and the conditions of lower-income life?

The answers to these questions are both interrelated and complex; it would be a gross misrepresentation of reality to say that the black man should pursue these routes of mobility. The fact remains that he is pursuing these routes. It takes no profound insight to see that in crime and politics the Negro has been working his way into the higher positions of power. Yet, like the Jew and the Italian before him, he has been forced to contend with the established criminal and plitical elites.

Political considerations are also operative. The recent black political successes in Gary, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; and Newark, New Jersey underscore the contention that the traditional path of ethnic political power is being utilized. Among both black militants and moderates there is a growing awareness that the key to success lies not in violence and disorder but rather in political organization and political mobility.[14]

Black power and black consciousness are consequentially considered as necessary intermediary means to the politicalization of the Negro population.[15] Also, if present demographic projections hold true, the major urban centers of America will be predominantly black and consequently the population base for Negro political leverage will be present. Ethnic solidarity thus becomes the key to the subsequent political power and political mobility of the entire group.

A closer examination of the employment route, however, presents a problem. Unlike all his predecessors, the lower-income black faces one enduring fact of contemporary economic structure--the relative disappearance of unskilled occupations. The lower-income Negro increasingly can be classified as economically useless.[16] Economic and technological development since World War II have eliminated precisely those positions which the Black man might have utilized as leverage for subsequent mobility. Without these jobs he has little chance of removing himself from the lower class, for employment in these occupations constitutes the barest minimum necessary for ethnic mobility.

Class factors are also evident in the employment situation confronting the Black man. The unavailability of unskilled jobs does not specifically effect the black middle-class and, to that degree, its members increasingly participate in the economic and social prosperity so characteristic of

contemporary American society. The Negro thusly has been victimized not primarily by his color but by his lower-class position. In this he remains scarcely different from his Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, Indian or Appalachian white counterpart. All are substantially represented in the lower class, and upward mobility is increasingly very difficult due to the economic structural forces beyond their control. The recent urban disorders in dozens of cities has underscored this problem of class. In many of the cities, the rioters demonstrated the same hostility towards middle-class blacks as they did towards white policemen, firemen, and business proprietors. It should also be emphasized that lower-income blacks were not the only lower-income groups to participate in urban disorders, for New York City, Paterson and Passaic (New Jersey) witnessed outbreaks among the lower-income Puerto Rican community.

The rigidity of lower-class positioning and the increasing uncertainty of upward mobility thus create tensions in those individuals cut off from the prospects of improving their social lot. Given the proper environment, these tensions historically have erupted in violence and destruction. As the Riot Commission has pointed out, the typical rioter was better educated, better informed, and geographically more stable than the non-rioter of the same neighborhood.[17] He perhaps had more reason to hope for subsequent upward mobility yet the inevitable workings of an economic structure which cannot, or will not, use his labor has confronted him with the realities of the American class structure. His behavior bears the marks of vengeance, of lashing back at a society which has promised him much yet has removed the routes to the rewards. It may be surmised that the non-rioter, comprises an American variation of the Marxian "lumpenproletariat"--that group which has been so suppressed that appeals to revolution and retaliation become meaningless and hollow.

Specifically then, the Negro statistically comprises the most important ethnic group in the urban lower class. His problems and tragedies are those of preceding ethnic minorities, yet the profound economic changes in American society have greatly complicated his status and his potential for mobility. These changes have produced the disorders of Watts, Detroit, Newark, and Washington. In turn the unskilled Negro's relative economic marginality has created the impetus for the proliferation of many of the socio-psychological problems of the ghetto with its underlying proverbial culture of poverty, its irrelevant educational system, its so-called multi-problem families, and its forced exclusion from affluent America through economic dysfunction.[18]

Racial considerations add but little to the analysis of these issues; all too often they act as smokescreens which mask the real problems. If race and racial considerations exerted primary importance, it would increasingly be difficult to interpret the values and styles of life of the black middle-class population. These values are vastly different from the black lower class, yet they are essentially similar to the values and life styles of the white middle-class population. The gap thus exists between the classes, more so than between the races; it is between the white and black middle class on one hand, and the white and black lower class on the other. Skin color and the history of servitude do little to explain this present polarization of the classes.

For our purposes then, social class differentials assume a primary position in defining and explaining the relationship between upward mobility and the behavior of specific ethnic groups, while racial stigmatization can be considered as relatively secondary in importance. It should be stressed however that racial considerations are relevant to the issue. How much emphasis should be placed on these racial factors though, is debatable.

Class differentials more so than racial differentials, explain the presence and persistence of poverty in the ranks of the urban Negro. It thus becomes superfluous to speak of the problem in moral terms, in the rhetoric of brotherly love and social equality. However noble these answers may be, they ignore the reality of ethnic mobility, for no group has ever achieved parity unless it followed the well-traversed route of labor, crime, and politics. Only after each of the groups achieved relative success and power in these ventures were they "accepted." Social acceptance and social integration were the last steps, and perhaps the easiest steps, in the long journey from the bottom. In contemporary America, many well-meaning individuals and groups particularly in the field of social welfare, have placed the cart before the horse.. They have argued for social acceptance first, from which ultimately should come economic equality, political power, etc., rather than arguing the converse. To argue in this manner merely aggravates the situation, for it deflects the forces of change from the economic and structural considerations and wastes them in moral reform and psychological catharsis.

Essentially then, the black man's odyssey is scarcely different from that of previous ethnic minorities; it only remains for American society to provide the economic foundation necessary to make the journey productive and rewarding.

FOOTNOTES

[1]James M. O'Kane, "Ethnic Mobility and the Lower-Income Negro: A Socio-Historical Perspective", Social Problems, Vol. 16, No. 3, Winter 1969, pp. 302-11; see also Stuart Hills, "Negroes and Immigrants in America", Sociological Focus, Vol. 3, Summer 1970 pp. 85-96.

[2]The Report of the National Advisory Commission has subscribed to this approach, stating: "Racial discrimination is undoubtedly the second major reason why the Negro has been unable to escape from poverty. The structure of discrimination has persistently narrowed his opportunities and restricted his prospects. Well before the high tide of immigration from occupation. . . .European immigrants, too, suffered from discrimination, but never was it so pervasive as the prejudice against color in America which has formed a bar to advancement, unlike any other." Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, New York: Bantam Books, 1968, pp. 278-79.

[3]John F. Scott and Lois H. Scott, "They Are Not So Much Anti-Negro as Pro-Middle Class," New York Times Magazine, March 24, 1968, p. 46.

[4]See O'Kane op. cit., p. 305.

[5]Oscar Handlin writes, "In the theatre, art, music and athletic worlds, talent was more or less absolute; and discrimination was much less effective than in other realms. This accounted for the high incidence among Negroes and Puerto Ricans to seek these pursuits as a way up; and it accounted also for the popularity and high status among them of prize fighters, musicians and the like, a popularity of which the incidence of reference in

in magazines and newspapers is a striking index." Oscar Handlin, The Newcomers, Garden City: Doubleday --1962, p. 72.

[6]E. Digby Baltzell, The Protestant Establishment, New York: Vintage, 1966, p.49.

[7]Oscar Handlin, op. cit., p. 19.

[8]Herbert Asbury, The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld, New York: Knopf, 1929, p. 37.

[9]Daniel Bell, "Crime as an American Way of Life," Antioch Review, 13 (September, 1953), pp. 131-54.

[10]Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, Delinquency and Opportunity, Glencoe: Free Press, 1960, p. 196.

[11]Oscar Handlin, op. cit., p. 26; see also Herberg's discussion of the immigrant groups and political development, in Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1960, p. 17.

[12]Boss Joseph Maloney, Alderman of "Cornerville" bitterly recognized this stating, "Then the Italians will always vote for one of their own. We recognized them when we didn't need to. They didn't have many votes, and we could have licked them everytime, but we gave them Italian representatives. We did it for the sake of the organization. But they wouldn't stick by us. The Italian people are very undependable. You can't trust them at all.

They play a dirty game too. I estimate that now there are between eight hundred and a thousand repeaters in Cornerville every election. I've tried to stop that, but you can't do it. You can't tell one Italian from another." William Whyte, Street Corner Society, Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1955, p. 95.

[13]E. D. Baltzell, op. cit., p. 217 ff.

[14]Fred Cook, "It's Our City, Don't Destroy It", New York Times Magazine, June 30, 1968, p. 31.

[15]For a recent appraisal of the relationship between black power and the Negro community, see Seymour Leventman, "Black Power and the Negro Community in Mass Society", paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, August, 1968.

[16]For an interesting article dealing with the economics of uselessness of the lower-income Negro, see Sidney M. Willhelm and Edwin Powell, "Who Needs the Negro?", Trans-action, 1 (September-October, 1964), pp. 3-6.

[17]The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, op. cit., pp. 128-35.

[18]See Eliot Liebow, Tally's Corner, Little, Brown and Company, 1967.